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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement by the Women's National Commission, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The Women's National Commission is the official independent advisory body on women of the Government of the United Kingdom. To mark the fifteenth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, the organization consulted with its partners, whose views are reflected in its publication "What's Beijing Got to Do with Me?". The publication is intended to inform the Government and the United Nations.

Poverty

2. Historically, many older women in the United Kingdom are affected by poverty because they have not built up assets and savings. Only 30 per cent of women get the full basic state retirement pension, compared to 85 per cent of men.[1] In Northern Ireland, it is 25 per cent of women and support is needed for the poorest women, pensioners and mothers bringing up children alone.[2]

3. Before women have children, their average pay is 91 per cent of men's, but drops to 67 per cent thereafter.[3]

Education

4. More recently, girls have outperformed boys at school. Their success does not, however, always translate into well-paid careers owing to gender stereotyping in the workplace, traditional caring roles and the aspirations of many young women.

5. Our partners have commented that many girls in the United Kingdom need to see women in leadership positions, and provision for non-violent, equal relationships between girls and boys to be taught in schools. Boys are not taught to share responsibility for household chores and childcare, so women still do 70 per cent of the housework. There are serious concerns that schooling for immigrant women is inadequate: 9 per cent cannot read.[4] More work could be done to ensure that disabled and refugee girls are not discriminated against.

Health

6. Many women have told us that women themselves should be more involved in the design of health-care services which meet their particular needs. Health services could be more sensitive to different cultures: lesbians still report hostility from

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[1] See Department of Work and Pensions, The Gender Impact of Pensions Reform, http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/genderimpactassessment.pdf.

[2] A wide range of measures of economic inequality in Northern Ireland concluded that single mothers were by far the most deprived group, see Scullion, F., Hillyard, P., and McLaughlin, E. (2005), *Poverty and Social Exclusion Project: Lone Parent Households in Northern Ireland*, Bulletin No. 1, February 2005, Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and Borooah, V. (2007), "Measuring Economic Inequality: Deprivation, Economising and Possessing", *Social Policy and Society*, vol. 6, issue 1 (Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, shadow report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, March 2008).

[3] Brewer, M. and Paull, G. (2006), "New borns and new schools: critical times in women's employment", research report No. 308, Department for Work and Pensions.

[4] See http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/12inequalities_experienced_by_gypsy_and_traveller_communities_a_review.pdf.

mental health professionals,[5] and immigrant women suffer high rates of miscarriages, stillbirths and maternal mortality.[6]

7. Partners felt the United Kingdom Government should extend the abortion law to cover Northern Ireland[7] and concerns were raised over the lack of access to emergency contraception, and the intimidation which stops women from accessing information and advice.

Violence

8. The Government consulted, in the spring of 2009, on how to combat violence against women and girls, including the development of a cross-cutting government approach. The Women's National Commission played a major part in this regard, hosting 40 focus groups as the partner of choice for Government departments with a diverse range of hard-to-reach women. A task force of health professionals was set up in response to issues raised during that consultation. The Commission has also established a new working group to consider the potential threat of trafficked women to coincide with the 2012 London Olympics, and it will share the information obtained with Ministers.

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[5] King, M. and McKeown, E., "Mental health and social wellbeing of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals in England and Wales", Mind, For better mental health, 2003.

[6] See http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/12inequalities_experienced_by_gypsy_and_traveller_communities_a_review.pdf.

[7] This statement is based on the following evidence from organizations in Northern Ireland:

(a) Statement of Dr. Audrey Simpson, Director of the Family Planning Association Northern Ireland (www.fpa.org.uk): "A Northern Irish woman in the twenty-first century who is the victim of rape or incest is expected to give birth, or find up to £2,000 to travel for treatment in England where women have the right to access safe abortion. These are a vulnerable group of women who need support — not to be forced to find money and travel long distances on their own".

(b) Submission of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (March 2008) urging the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in considering the sixth periodic report of the United Kingdom, to call on the United Kingdom Government to provide equal access to reproductive health care for women in Northern Ireland: "The Commission recommends that the Committee urge the United Kingdom Government to: respond to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women by calling for the same access to reproductive health-care services and rights in Northern Ireland as are available in Great Britain".

(c) In its shadow report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in March 2008, the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform recommended that: the Government should ensure that the legal regulation of abortion in Northern Ireland acknowledge and be compliant with the State's international human rights obligations; women in Northern Ireland should be able to secure early access to abortion services.

(d) In a letter to Members of Parliament, sent on 8 July, the Alliance for Choice (http://allianceforchoiceni.org), based in Derry, Northern Ireland, appealed to the Members to use the free vote on abortion to extend to women in Northern Ireland the right to this vital health care. Signatories to the letter included Dawn Purvis, MLA Belfast East; Eileen Calder, Director, Belfast Rape Crisis Centre; John Corey, General Secretary, Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance; Jimmy Kelly, Regional Secretary, UNITE; Patricia McKeown, Regional Secretary, UNISON; and Margaret Ward, Director, Women's Resource and Development Agency.

(e) On 18 July 2008, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women noted that "the Abortion Act (1967) does not extend to Northern Ireland where, with limited exceptions, abortion continues to be illegal with detrimental consequences for women's health ... In line with its general recommendation 24 on women and health and the Beijing Platform for Action, the Committee also urges the State party to give consideration to the amendment of the abortion law so as to remove punitive provisions imposed on women who undergo abortion".

9. Partner organizations have informed the Women's National Commission that what exists across the United Kingdom should be mapped and good practices adopted.[8] In this regard, there has been support for the Scottish model. There are a number of important issues to be addressed, including the need for: additional specialized refuges for women travellers in the United Kingdom in view of the fact that, despite high levels of abuse, there is only one;[9] provision of increased services for people in same-sex relationships experiencing domestic violence; and more attention to the level and type of violence faced by women with learning disabilities. In addition, there is a need for better rape conviction rates. Partner organizations have welcomed the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change.

Conflict

10. The United Kingdom Government's national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), while comprehensive, is seen to relate only to other countries, despite the fact that Northern Ireland is a country emerging from conflict with very few women in key institutions. The plan for Northern Ireland could include indicators and actions, and its executive branch should have its own action plan with targets. Women should be involved not only in peacemaking but also post-conflict reconstruction peacekeeping, negotiations of agreements to prevent conflict and post-conflict negotiations.

11. There were also calls to give sensitive treatment to women refugees, who need translation services, better health advice and more involvement in decision-making.

Economy

12. In 2006, the Women and Work Commission published a report[9] highlighting the strong economic case for women's economic participation. The Government accepted the majority of the Commission's recommendations.

13. The economic downturn has brought women's economic activity into sharp relief; many feel that pregnancy and maternity should not lead to discrimination against women during this recession. It is estimated that about 30,000 women a year lose their jobs due to pregnancy. Furthermore, partners felt strongly that laws on equal pay are not working; the gender pay gap is still 22.8 per cent[10] although public service agreement targets have been introduced to address this and the Government has produced documents based on research conducted on the impact of the economic downturn on women.[11]

Women in power

14. Women's disproportionate responsibility for domestic and caring responsibilities can limit their political activity. In addition, women's poverty has a significant effect on their participation in the political process. There are calls for more women at all levels to make the important decisions which affect their lives. There is

[8] Consultative report from Northern Ireland prepared by Commissioner Bronagh Hinds.

[9] Women and Work Commission, "Shaping a Fairer Future: a review of the recommendations of the Women and Work Commission three years on".

[10] See United Kingdom Government response to Beijing to 15 questionnaire, May 2009.

[11] See Government Equalities Office, *The economic downturn — the concerns and experiences of women and families*, http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/GEO%20Economic%20downturn-%20WEB.pdf.

currently Government activity to encourage greater numbers of women to participate in public life, and the Women's National Commission has been holding a series of workshops to increase civic participation.

15. There have been calls for a "Minister for Women" in Scotland[12] and a dedicated Women's Minister needed in Northern Ireland. Some partner organizations felt that most of the political parties had not made use of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 — none of the parties in Northern Ireland have used it.[13] The Equality and Human Rights Commission has recently noted that since its 2004 report no progress has been made in achieving a gender balance in decision-making bodies in Wales.

Ways to make equality happen

16. The Gender Equality Duty, introduced in 2007, has been widely welcomed as a positive mechanism to tackle gender issues. However, this is not fully understood by every public body; training is needed for Government officials in gender analysis and budgeting. The Women's National Commission commissioners have consistently championed the need to implement the provisions appropriately and there is a discrete commissioner's group to look into the development of an "equalities bill" to ensure that women's interests are both protected and promoted within national legislation.

17. Partners have called for a select committee on equality in the United Kingdom Parliament, and a committee specifically devoted to gender issues in the Northern Ireland Assembly.[13]

Human rights

18. Our partners have called for more information about the rights of women in this country. Government action should include training in human rights and equal rights for women, in particular teachers and Members of Parliament.

19. It is felt that a bill of rights is needed for Northern Ireland, reflecting the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The Government should accept the recommendations made by the Commission on the rights for women detained in Northern Ireland.[13]

The media

20. Partners organizations feel that there is a need for more "real women" on television, and fewer anorexic stereotypes. There were calls for fewer provocative photographs of women in the tabloid press or in advertisements and less reporting of what women politicians wear and more on what they say. More could be done to present women's views on all issues, not just women's issues.

21. Women are concerned with being excluded from work such as programming and development. There have been calls for women with learning disabilities and

[12] Taking Forward the Government Economic Strategy: A discussion paper on tackling poverty, inequality and deprivation in Scotland, Engender, 2008 ("it would be productive to create the position of a Minister for Women at the devolved level in the Scottish Parliament").

[13] See Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, shadow report to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, March 2008.

mental illness to be depicted in a positive light. Senior management teams of major broadcasters in Wales are 44 per cent female; the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that only the Welsh language weekly "Golwg" has a female editor.

The environment

22. More could be done to involve more women in making plans for transport and the environment, to ensure they meet women's needs. Most public transport users are women and more could be done to promote environmental issues in schools. In Newcastle, delegates argued strongly for the need to empower women as consumers to bring about lasting change.

23. Partner organizations feel that the Government must focus on the gender impact of climate change and the importance of gender action within the Climate Change Act. The Welsh Assembly could use gender budgeting in this area, for example working alongside the Wales Gender Budget Group to better understand how climate change financing can impact women's participation and representation.

Girls

24. Mothers across the United Kingdom want better opportunities for their daughters, and less stereotyping in careers. Many girls leave school lacking the confidence to advance further in their education and training. The United Kingdom has among the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe. Girls should continue to receive full education while pregnant. At present some get very limited amounts of home tutoring, resulting in even more limited career prospects.[14]

25. There is a growing concern that girls are being "sexualized" far too early in life and that "gang culture" is especially damaging and dangerous for young girls in the United Kingdom. More investment, funding and resources in youth work for girls are needed.

[14] The percentage of 16- to 19-year-old mothers in education, employment or training is 33 per cent (2006-2008): see United Kingdom Government response to the Beijing to 15 questionnaire, May 2009.